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ABSTRACT

An educational program called KIDSPEAK was designed to teach oral communication skills to children in grades three through six in four public and private school districts in Fargo, North Dakota and Moorhead, Minnesota. Topics which have been taught include: basic public speaking skills; oral reading; listening; creative expression and storytelling; speaking with a purpose; communication etiquette; and speaking and working in groups. A unit on debate was also introduced and widely accepted. Four areas of debate were identified as being most important for children to understand: debate format; asking questions and responding to questions in debate; the use of evidence in debate; and practicing the art of debate. Each of these areas was divided into six lessons or activities. At the end of the month the parents came to listen to their children debate and were very pleased that their children could master the debate concepts. The children were praised for what they accomplished individually and competition was not stressed. By starting debate at an early age, children can invest time and energy to learn and master some of the basic concepts of the activity. The two key factors involved in offering debate for children are (1) finding a teacher who is intrested in the activity and (2) locating a curriculum that is appropriate. (Two appendixes containing the table of contents from the KIDSPEAK program and six lessons about asking questions in debate are attached.) (MG)

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DEBATE INSTRUCTION AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL: AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD LEGITIMACY

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that debate concepts can be taught at the elementary school level by teachers with minimal training in "academic" debate. Selected lessons from a debate unit developed by the authors for a unique program in the Fargo, North Dakota area entitled, KIDSPEAK, are presented and discussed.

DEBATE INSTRUCTION AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL:

AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD LEGITIMACY

The case for debate instruction at the elementary school level has been made in The Forensic Educator (1988/89). However, legitimacy for such a program has not enjoyed widespread acceptance among the academic community for a number of reasons, including: (1) lack of elementary school teachers who are trained to be debate coaches; (2) lack of funding for debate activities at the elementary school level; (3) concern over the ability of elementary-aged children to understand debate concepts; and (4) the absence of an institutional priority to develop debate programs at the elementary level. While each of these reasons may be valid in particular situations, the fact that reasons have existed to limit the introduction of debate classes at the elementary school level has been a disadvantage in the establishment of legitimacy for debate activities until children have reached the senior high school level. By not creating debate courses at the elementary school level, has a disservice been done to the students who have been denied the benefits of debate until later in their secondary education? In addition, has a disservice been done to the activity by not creating programs in grade schools where "legitimacy" might be fostered for academic debate?

Legitimacy is a term that has its roots in tradition and accepted norms or behaviors. When children move through the early grades, there are few "team" opportunities for them to

experience besides those associated with athletic events. When children participate in athletics, they and their parents "invest" in the activity by committing time, practice, and money to participate. The assumption behind early involvement in sports is that there will be a "payoff" when the youth gets into high school--either a "starting position" or enhanced athletic ability. All children want to be accepted. Athletics affords children with a "legitimate" way to satisfy their need for acceptance.

By not having debate activities available for children while in elementary school, there is the possibility that "legitimacy" will never be established in the minds of some children. Other "choices" may be made by the student prior to high school when most debate programs become available for participation. The ratio of debaters to athletes at most schools would lead one to the conclusion that more students prefer athletics. The absence of recognized "legitimacy" is a compelling reason why this preference might exist.

Starting a debate program, or offering a debate curriculum, at the elementary school level is not as difficult as it might appear. The two key factors involved in offering debate for children include finding a teacher who is interested in the activity and locating a curriculum that is appropriate for instruction. Through the experiences of the authors, neither of these problems posed a significant barrier to the introduction of debate to children.

The KIDSPEAK Program

An educational program of activity for children in grades three through six in four public and private school districts in the Fargo, North Dakota and Moorhead, Minnesota area was created in 1987. Nationally registered as KIDSPEAK, this after-school activity program was designed to teach oral communication skills to children. Public and private elementary schools provided meeting space. The average number of sites operating during a given month was four.

Since its inception, nearly 200 children have participated in the various month-long KIDSPEAK units of instruction that have been developed, including such topics as: Basic public speaking skills, oral reading, listening, creative expression and storytelling, speaking with a purpose, communication etiquette, and speaking and working in groups. In addition, a unit on debate was introduced and widely accepted by the children who participated in the program. The remainder of this paper will address the training of teachers and development of the curriculum used to teach debate concepts to children.

A two-hour training session was used to instruct the individuals who were hired to work with the children. The majority of teachers had very little training in speech and most had no experience with debate. During the training session, each lesson was described and suggestions were made as to how the different parts of the unit might best be taught. Two teachers were hired to work at each site, enabling the children to be

divided into groups for instruction and practice. The program directors visited the sites, responded to questions from the teachers, and assisted when needed for additional advice. Once trained, the teachers felt confident about teaching the unit and required little actual supervision.

The unit on debate was challenging to create because of the necessity for simplifying somewhat technical terms and difficult concepts. Four areas were identified as being most important for children to understand: (1) the debate format; (2) asking questions and responding to questions in debate; (3) the use of evidence in debate; and (4) practicing the art of debate. Each of these areas was divided into six lessons, or activities, that the children mastered when they worked with the teachers in what might be commonly referred to as "learning stations." Each of the lessons was designed to be completed in 15 to 20 minutes. (For a table of contents for the unit that was developed see Appendix A.)

Each lesson was designed to present the concept and then to provide an activity for the children to master. Flash cards were used to help the children to become acquainted with the terms and feel comfortable using them. Each lesson focused on a specific skill, and the teacher led a follow-up discussion to learn why the skill was useful for the student to master. (For a sample of the lessons that were developed see Appendix B.)

The number of children that participated at the different sites necessitated flexibility when planning actual debate

practice sessions. The traditional formats were modified somewhat. For example, time limits were shorted considerably. Lincoln Douglas and two-person debate formats were used. The children were given resolutions for each activity, and they developed their cases with evidence to debate. The children were taught to develop their cases, which were often quite sophisticated. For example, children debated the Panama Canal Treaty, smokers' rights, the "best" pet for children, and the value of homework. The older children often selected topics that involved a greater awareness of the world around them. The younger children selected topics of a more personal nature. All topics were approved by the teachers prior to the development of the cases.

At the end of the month, parents came to listen to their children debate. The children were divided into groups of affirmatives and negatives. The affirmatives presented their cases to the negatives in one round. Later, the affirmatives changed sides and served as the negative speakers when the other group members presented their cases. The parents were very surprised and pleased that their children could master the debate concepts and debate at such an early age. The children were proud of their accomplishments and wanted to keep debating after the rounds concluded. The teachers became believers that a debate program could be offered at the elementary school level.

The outcomes varied when evaluating the individual performances of the children. For some of the participants,

simply learning how to "take turns" when presenting reasons for or against a topic was a major accomplishment. For others, mastering the appropriate techniques for asking or responding to questions was a realistic goal. The directors of KIDSPEAK shared with the teachers that the child's first experience with debate should be positive. Therefore, the children were praised for what they individually accomplished and competition was not stressed.

What all of this suggests is that like athletics, debate activities can be offered to children while in elementary school. By starting debate at an earlier age, children can "invest" time and energy to learn and master some of the basic concepts of the activity. By providing a non-athletic alternative when children are looking for and still deciding what they want to "try," debate can be legitimized as a valuable educational and "team" experience. A long term benefit of this activity may have an impact upon debate programs at the junior and senior high level, as well.

Source Cited

Littlefield, R.S. (1988/89). The case for debate at the elementary school level. The Forensic Educator, 3, (1), 23-26.

APPENDIX A

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*NEWSPAPER REQUIRED TO COMPLETE LESSON.

APPENDIX B

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Step Two: Asking Questions in Debate

Cross examination is the process of asking questions in debate. There are several kinds of questions that can be asked. However, in debates, certain types of questions are better because they call for specific information. In addition, polite and fair questions should be the type asked by the questioners.

Some questions are "open-ended." That means the person who answer them can explain or give a lot of information. "Why" and "how" questions are "open-ended." Open-ended questions should rarely be asked because they take a long time to answer and usually, question periods are short.

Questions that are more useful in debate call for "yes" or "no" answers. They tend to keep the answers short and allow the questioner to have more time for asking more questions. "Did," "what," and "who" questions are good for debaters to use.

In this step, there are six topics that will be covered:

1. "Closed-ended" questions (yes or no answers)
2. "Open-ended" questions.
3. Putting your questions in order.
4. Questions to help you understand.
5. Good behavior for the questioner.
6. Good behavior for the answerer.

LESSON #1: Closed-Ended Questions

Closed-ended questions are best in debate because they require shorter answers and help the questioner to keep control of the questioning period.

Working in pairs, ask questions of your partner that begin with "Did...," "Will...," or "Can...." Try to keep your partner answer with "yes," "no," or other short responses.

For example:

Q: Have you ever seen hockey players hit each other against the sides of the ice rink?
Q: What color is the sky at dawn when the sun is coming up?
Q: Do dentists clean your teeth when you have check-ups?
Q: Do you go to school?
Q: Where do you go to school?

Now, think of questions and take turns asking them.

List your questions here:

LESSON #2: Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions allow for the answers to be longer and more complete. When possible, you should try to explain your answers clearly and as completely as you can.

Working in pairs, ask questions of your partner that begin with "why...," or "how...." As your partner answers each question, allow enough time for a complete answer. These are NOT "yes" or "no" questions.

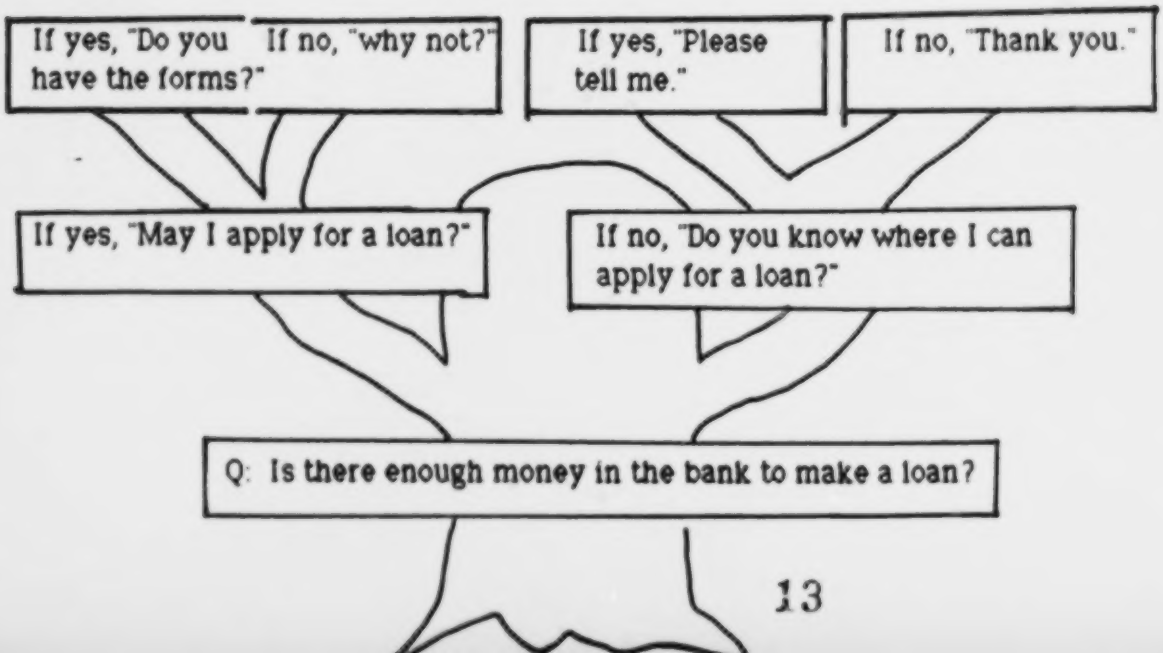
For example:
Q: Why do old people go to nursing homes?
Q: How are french fries and potato chips made?
Q: What games do you like to play?
Q: Why do you like to come to KIDSPEAK?
Q: How do you make sand castles?

Now, think of questions and take turns asking them. Write your questions here:

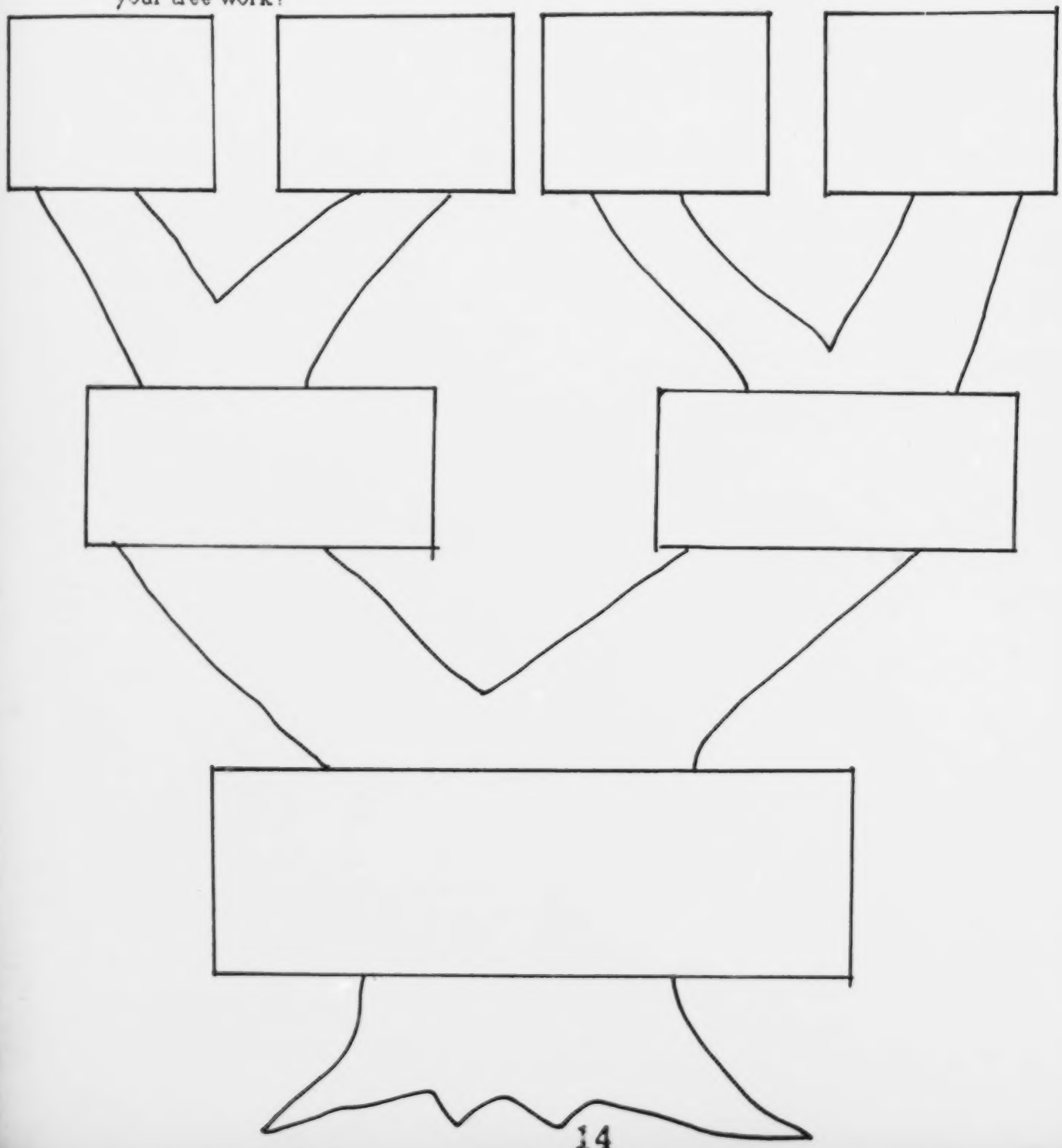
LESSON #3: Sequences of Questions

When you think of several questions in a row, these groups of questions can be called a "sequence." Sometimes, these groups of questions are referred to as "cross examination trees." Cross examination is a form of questioning that is used when one person tries to check or find loopholes in the comments of another person. If you have every seen a trial on television or in person, when one attorney is questioning a witness, he or shee is in the process of "cross examination."

These cross examination trees have branches that lead to questions. For example:


If yes, "Do you have the forms?"
If no, "why not?"
If yes, "Please tell me."
If no, "Thank you."
If yes, "May I apply for a loan?"
If no, "Do you know where I can apply for a loan?"
Q: Is there enough money in the bank to make a loan?

Take one of the topics listed earlier and prepare a "cross examination tree." After you prepare your "tree" work with a partner and ask the questions. Did your tree work?



LESSON #4: Asking Questions for Clarification

YOU NEED A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE TO COMPLETE THIS LESSON.

Sometimes you don't understand what someone means when they speak. You might need to ask questions for clarification. Read a short article from the newspaper you have brought with you and let the other students ask you questions of clarification to find out more facts.

Write down questions you might want to ask others about their articles:

LESSON #5: Good Behavior for the Questioner

There are certain rules that should be followed while asking questions in a debate.

1. The questioner stands next to the speaker in front of the room.
2. Stand so you may see the speaker as well as the audience.
3. All questions should be related to what was presented by the speaker.
4. Sarcasm or rude comments should be avoided.
5. Questions should call for short answers.
6. If you feel the speaker is wasting your time with an answer, you may say, "Thank you," or "that is enough."
7. The questioner controls the time period.

Working in pairs, stand in front and take turns being questioner and speaker. Try to ask questions with yes or no answers. You may use any topic of your choice (a family trip, your favorite subject in school, favorite food, etcetera).

Write down some questions here to get you started.

LESSON #6: Good Behavior for the Answerer

When you are answering questions, there are certain rules you should follow.

1. Stand so you may see the questioner and the audience.
2. If the questioner asks you to keep your answers brief, you are obliged to do what you are told.
3. It is not proper to answer a question with another question.
4. When asked a question, the speaker may not ask anyone else to answer.

Working in pairs, practice giving answers in a courteous way. Remember the rules and try to answer each question in as complete a way as possible.

Write down some questions here that you can use in practice.

Let's Review . . .

Step Two has dealt with asking questions. There are two types of questions used in debate. CLOSED-ENDED questions should be used as much as possible to keep the answers short and to the point. Closed-ended questions are often "yes" or "no" questions. However, any question needing only a short answer could be "closed-ended." OPEN-ENDED questions let the speaker spend a lot of time answering. "How" and "why" questions are considered "open-ended."

When asking many related questions, the questioner is using a CROSS EXAMINATION TREE. These can be useful in following up on answers given by the speaker.

Both the questioner and the answerer must follow the rules of courtesy and deal with each other in a pleasant manner.

Evaluation Time . . .

Category	Excellent	Good	Needs Work
Open-Ended Questions			
Understands concept			
Demonstrates concept			
Closed-Ended Questions			
Understands concept			
Demonstrates concept			
CX Tree			
Understands concept			
Can prepare in group			
Can prepare alone			
Questions of Clarification			
Behavior			
Questioner			
Answerer			
Overall Evaluation:			

Comments: